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Rosa Guy and out friend Leda Orem

When Leda ^(Selva)Orem was a girl living in Budapest, where her father was a shoe manufacturer, she went to school on the other side of the Danube, walking there during World War II. The day of the (first?) (US) bombing of Budapest she could not get home because the bridges were bombed out. That was the beginning of her wandering through war-torn Europe for two years. She never did get home and to this day does ~~Not~~ know whether her family survived or not. Leda is ^{who} ~~was~~ is usually referred to as a "simple" simple soul." She is a fine human being but not educated and not intellectual or sophisticated. Just a very good person.

We got to know Leda and in general the story of her life when I first went to work for H & R Block as a tax consultant, the late 1960s, the era of the civil-rights controversies. When I heard the essence I saw a fine novel and possibly a movie in it. But not for me. Leda, I learned, had a special reason for wanting her story known, even though it involved such abuses of her as a girl as rape.

She came here one day and I recorded her account for five hours. It was not an interview, not structured. I just kept her talking and recalling her story in her own words. It is disjointed but faithful and in a quiet way exceptionally emotional and appealing. I told her I would try to interest someone who could do well with it or knew someone who could in it.

At the beginning of those two incredible years Leda and another little girl paired up. The other girl, Nicolcz (phon), also Hungarian, wandered together, in general toward the northwest. During an air raid when they separated in taking cover Nicolcz was killed and thereafter ~~she~~ Leda wandered alone. I do not try to recall or recapture all her actual experiences but she was where both the Germans and the Russians held the territory and was treated worse by the Russians.

She wound up ragged, half-starved and hiding in a railroad boxcar in which she had taken shelter when she was found by a young black ^{soldier} ~~man~~ from Frederick, Edward Harry Orem. He did not take advantage of her. He found ways of getting clothing for her, he took food to her, he did what he could for her. They fell in love but because Eddie, as he is known, is black and they could not get anyone to marry them. Before Eddie, who was a truck driver, was assigned elsewhere Leda had one child, perhaps two, perhaps ^{was} pregnant with the second.

Still in every way a girl, Leda got what jobs she could, I remember working in a US PX, and from her slight income paid a German woman to take care of her children, infants. Working took her from place in Germany, she lost track of Eddie and he of her, but where ^{was} ~~where~~ she worked she sent the agreed sum to the woman caring for her infants. ^{and he her before} ~~when she could not take~~ Another black man for whom she did not care very much took a shine to her and wanted to marry her. She, a Catholic, went to see a priest. She told him she did not love this ^{soldier} ~~man~~ but she hoped that if she married him and he took her to the US she might locate Eddie.

She wanted to know if it would be a sin if she married this man she did not love for the purpose of being able to find the man she did love and be reunited with him and their boys. The priest told her that would not be a sin. So, she decided to return to the US with him, marry him and take her infants with them, to which he had agreed. I do not recall the details of her travel. I'm sure it was not with the soldier.

When she went to retrieve her infants she found that the woman she'd been paying to care for them had only one. When she tried to learn what happened to the other baby the woman threatened her and would tell her nothing. Leda took the remaining infant, Edward Harry Orem, Jr., and got to New England and the man she did not ~~love~~ love.

Her desire for her story being known was in the hope that she could somehow locate the missing son thereby. My hunch is that the woman sold the baby to a German girl who wanted to use it as a means of getting to the US.

Leda's ^{first} husband was a bad man. She got work and he took her pay and he abused her on other ways. She then got a job where she could get her employer to hold back some of her pay for her.

She knew that Eddie (the son ~~is~~ is called Harry) came from Frederick. She or perhaps a priest asked the Red Cross to assist. It did locate Eddie's mother but she, knowing the prevailing racism, knew that they'd have real problems living as man and wife in Frederick, lied to the Red Cross and said the man Leda was looking for was unknown to her.

When Leda's employer's withholding of some of her pay was enough for her to buy a bus ticket for Frederick, she took Harry and came here. She did find Eddie but they could not get a marriage ~~is~~ license. She was insulted at the courthouse and told she was a white whore, whoring to blacks. So, they lived together until they heard that they could get married in Washington, which they then did.

Eddie had a decent job as a maintenance man at local Fort Detrick. He took extra jobs at night, with Leda working with him, janitorial work, cleaning up places like banks, and gradually they could improve their housing. When they located the home they bought Leda's and Eddie's night work enable them to buy it.

Harry is trained as a draftsman but because of discrimination could not get that kind of job locally. When he was at Fort Detrick with his father one day after Eddie retired (bad back) and they met the foreman for whom Eddie had worked and he found that Eddie had this son, knowing the kind of employee Eddie was, thoroughly dependable, he said that he would like to arrange for Harry to work for him. He arranged it and Harry has been in that job for years. Dependable and liked as his father was he, like his father, was trained for a variety of jobs done in maintenance and will probably spend the rest of his working life in that job, which had been his father's.

In the late 1960s-early 1970s I knew Walter Glanze, then a Bantam editor. I told him about Leda, her story and my tapes. He said he'd like to hear them. I sent them to him,

telling him I thought the story should be written by a woman.

He started to play the tapes in the office when he got them. ~~He~~^{He} had a Cuban secretary. They were both touched by the story as Leda told it in her Hungarian English with ~~black~~^{and accented} black ways of speaking English. Office work kept them from hearing all the tapes before the end of the working day. The secretary, in tears, asked Walter to let her take the recorder and tapes home so she could hear the rest, and he did. ~~He~~^{He} later listened to the rest.

Rosa Guy, the head of the Harlem Writers' union, was living with Walter. Walter is of German parentage, very well educated and now a lexicographer. He also worked for US occupation forces in Germany, I think including as a translator, and that seems to be how he got to the US.

Roda fell in love with Leda's story. She wrote the first chapter of a book on it. Walter interested Bernard Geis in it. Geis offered her a \$20,000 advance and Walter counselled her that this sum, not bad for those days, was not enough, particularly as an indication of the effort Geis would make, including movie interest.

Meanwhile, although they remained and remain good friends, Rosa and Walter broke up and Roda had to do what writing she could get paid for immediately so she had income. She did not return to Leda's story.

Time passed and I asked Walter, having last track of Rosa, for the tapes.

I forgot, Rosa and Walter came here, met and spoke to the Orem's, and Rosa did some of her own interviewing, not taped, just to get the feel of Leda and Eddie.

By then Rosa could not find two of the tapes. I have the other three and Rosa's chapter draft.

The passing of two decades of time has not changed my opinion that Leda's is a beautiful and terrible story at the same time, appalling ^(and heart-rending) in so many ways, and of real potential today. I have no doubt that if Leda and I listened to the remaining tapes she would be able to replace much of what was on the missing tapes and perhaps recall more. That we could tape.

Her bad luck did not end with the beginning of her good luck in finding Eddie.

She was injured as an industrial worker in Frederick (Fetters air conditioning) and got no workmen's compensation. Then when she was parked, waiting for a traffic light to change, a woman driving wildly came out of a McDonald's and hit Leda's car on the side. The car was totally, Leda was hospitalized with a broken ankle and perhaps other injuries, she remains handicapped and often in pain from this, and they were screwed by their lawyer, who settled the case out of court for a mere \$5,000. (He had been jailed for as I recall income-tax crookedness, did not lose his license, and I suspect he made some kind of deal with the woman's insurance company. He is still prominent among local lawyers.)

Leda and ~~Harry~~^{Harry} Eddie are now grandparents, a pretty and bright granddaughter. Leda gave me the rights to the story.